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SUBJECT: BULGARIAN MEDIA INCLUDES CRITICISM OF RUSSIA IN GEORGIA
CRISIS

11. (U) SUMMARY: Initial, widespread coverage in the Bulgarian media of the Georgia-Russia conflict was generally thin on hard facts, often derived from other, Western outlets, and generally critical of Georgia's actions leading up to the conflict. Over time, the story moved off the front page, but analyses and commentary reflected a more balanced tone, with pro-Western and occasionally even centrist media criticizing Russian actions. Public opinion is still largely non-committal, though some opinion makers have hammered Russian policy and actions. END SUMMARY

12. (U) Bulgarian print and broadcast media covered the Georgia-Russia conflict extensively from its onset in early August and continue to pay special attention to the latest developments. The conflict made front-page headlines in almost all Bulgarian media and was the lead story on major Bulgarian TV and radio stations, with coverage mostly based on international news media reports, including newswire stories and video footage. National newspapers continue to run smaller pieces on the situation in Georgia and the efforts of the international community to broker peace and to secure the withdrawal of the Russian armed forces from Georgia.

13. (U) The press also dedicates some attention to Bulgarian efforts to help resolve the conflict, including offers for Sofia to host EU-led talks between Georgia and Russia as well as for the Bulgarian Black Sea port of Burgas to serve as a logistic center for the distribution of humanitarian assistance to Georgia.

14. (U) In most cases, initial Bulgarian media analyses and commentary stopped short of criticizing Russian aggression against Georgia, putting the blame on Georgian President Saakashvili, branding him a "hothead" and "crazy." One influential and traditionally pro-Western weekly noted "even though Russia set the traps, it was Saakashvili who drove Georgia in them."

15. (U) Follow-on media analyses have criticized both sides, as media balance Bulgaria's complicated history and sentimental ties to Russia with further concern about Russian actions. Predictably, most media have followed a general policy of "criticism all-around," but anti-Russian pieces have regularly appeared in the pro-Western press and even upon occasion in centrist national publications. That latter phenomenon represents a healthier reporting and analytic trend. Slanted, pro-Russian pieces are, sadly, still too frequent in some of the fringe papers. Electronic media have generally adopted an objective and low key approach.

16. (U) One leading pro-Western paper published a full-page opinion piece titled "The West's Complacency toward Moscow's Arbitrary Act," which argued that Russia inherently cannot accept the European world view of mutual dependence, instead pursuing its own sphere of influence where outside interference is not welcome. Another commentary noted that "Russia is showing the world its ugly face, which domestically has produced patriotic enthusiasm, diverting attention from the country's deepening international isolation and looming serious economic problems."

17. (U) Several national dailies have printed commentaries, calling on Bulgaria "to learn from the lessons" of the conflict. In particular, the country's second-largest newspaper noted the issuance of 100,000 Russian passports to residents of South Ossetia,

saying "it shows a contemplated and aggressive plot. . . . 100,000 Bulgarians with Russian passports? It could be a fact tomorrow and then this would be a Bulgarian problem. With this war, Russia is trying to create an international precedent - to defend militarily Russian passports abroad. . . . The Russian bear has roared - are we on our toes?"

18. (U) COMMENT: In general, the U.S. presidential race has enjoyed more overall coverage than the Georgia-Russia clash, and domestic Bulgarian issues remain the top story in virtually all Bulgarian media. The discussion in the news media is still largely confined to the Bulgarian intelligentsia and opinion makers, yet the analyses reflect strong concern about the situation in Georgia. END COMMENT